

Interview with Peter Morris

ProtoBall: What personal trail led you to your role as one of early base ball's best and most prolific authors?

Peter Morris: A fascination with the early history of baseball and a feeling that there were topics that deserved a book-length treatment but had not yet received one. In one way or another, every book I've written has been one that I first wished someone else had written. Only when I realized that nobody had done so and nobody was likely to do so, did I decide to write each of them.

ProtoBall: Academic writing on base ball in its early context (Guttman, Reiss, Rader, etc.) flourished less than a generation ago, and then pretty much stopped. Where did it come from, and why did it end?

Peter Morris: That's a great question. I think two major factors are that the academics who became most prominent in the field: (1) were way too devoted to modernization theory, an extremely narrow vantage point that left little theoretical room for subsequent researchers, and (2) produced work that often wasn't very good, at least when it came to baseball, but formed a little closed work in which they all praised one another's work whether good or bad. Guttman has a tremendous range of knowledge of so many sports from so many eras, but his work on baseball is superficial at best. In addition, when they were doing their work, there was a lot of basic spadework that had not yet been done. Now that so much more research has been done, we need a new generation of scholars with the courage to throw out much of what they did and start afresh. I'm looking forward to reading David Vaught's new book [The Farmers' Game: Baseball in Rural America (Johns Hopkins, 2013)], but haven't had the chance to do so yet.

ProtoBall: Your book A Game of Inches, now available in an indexed, 625-page single-volume edition, instantly became the first place to go for facts about early base ball events and for many, many base ball "firsts." What led you to undertake such a difficult task . . . and did you know what you were getting into when you launched into it?

Peter Morris: A Game of Inches really came out of the contributions I made to Paul Dickson's Baseball Dictionary. I've always been fascinated by baseball's rich language, so it was a lot of fun for me to try to

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track down the origins of many specific phrases. But in the process, it often became evident that a term only came into use when the thing itself did. Soon the project took on a life of its own.

Protoball: You undertook to maintain a website in conjunction with A Game of Inches, which was a way to keep the work current with new finds. What do you see as the lessons of that online experience?

Peter Morris: For me, online stuff was mostly headaches, so I've retreated.

Protoball: Do you have a favorite author, or work, that seems to be underappreciated among current researchers?

Peter Morris: It seems to me that Bill Ryczek is undervalued within the baseball research community as a whole, though I think specialists appreciate his work. One book that is unfairly neglected by nineteenth-century specialists is Stephen Fox's Big Leagues: Professional Baseball, Football, and Basketball in National Memory (U Nebraska, 1998).

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How Randall Brown Found the 1887 William Wheaton Article

Well do I remember the discovery of the interview that brought baseball's creation myths into question. I was on my way to see a Giants game and, by skipping dinner, could spend an hour at the San Francisco library. Like many Californians, I am a transplanted New Yorker, and, although originally a Mets fan, found it easy to switch allegiance to the first N.Y. National League franchise. As a historian, this offered the benefit of adopting the long and interesting history of Giants, including that afternoon's pursuit—the 1887 post-season visit of John Ward and Mike Kelly's "Giant Combination" to California.

My plan was to take a quick look at the *Examiner's* coverage of the exhibition games in San Francisco. I knew that "Phin" Thayer, author of "Casey at the Bat," was handling the paper's sports reporting that season, and hoped to find some good write-ups of the matches at Haight Street Park. The work proceeded well. There was a friendly interview with Tim Keefe, an intriguing description of a California League pitcher striking out Mike Kelly, and an item about a lopsided victory over the Stockton (Mudville) nine.

Time was running short as I rolled the film to Sunday, November 27. The Giants were featured in the first column and I hit the print button to capture that article. Before moving on, my attention was drawn to an item on the other side of the page entitled "Wizard Edison Talks," a story about the inventor's new phonograph. Looking to the left, I also noticed another headline—"How Baseball Began: A Member of the Gotham Club of Fifty Years Ago Talks About It." I figured both stories were worth a closer look, took copies, and headed out to the ball game, which the Giants won.

Although it was late when I returned home to Santa Cruz, I stayed up to review that day's finds. "How Baseball Began" turned out to be a jaw-dropper. The source of the story was not named but characterized as

“an old pioneer, formerly a well-known lawyer and politician, now living in Oakland.” After a discussion of the slowness of cricket and the dangerous effects of the old three-cornered cat rule of throwing the ball at the runner to put him out, the narrator stated that: “We first organized what we called the Gotham Baseball Club. This was the first ball organization in the United States and it was completed in 1837.” The next sentence, listing several members of the club, included a highly significant name—that of James Lee. I knew of Lee’s connection with the Knickerbocker Ball Club and I had read John Ward’s brief on baseball history, which mentioned that Lee had played “the same game” as a boy. This was a year after George Thompson’s article on the 1823 “N. Y. Base Ball Club,” so I discounted the claim that the Gotham’s were “the first ball organization in the U. S” (I have since come to believe that Lee was also one of the 1823 players).

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Digger News

Brian Turner reports that his recent research has remained focused on bat-ball and bat-and-ball, but has also focused on settlement patterns in western Massachusetts, to tease out whether that tells us something about why ball games were apparently named one thing (bat-ball) in one town (Northampton) in 1791 and another thing in other towns (such as the names ball games were known by Pittsfield).

A monograph on pre-1845 North American games played with a ball or some other projectile is a goal for **Tom Altherr**. The work would include, but not be limited to, safe haven games, and would include indoor as well as outdoor games. He notes that some of this work has appeared in the journal *Base Ball*, the SABR *Originals* newsletter, and Protoball’s online chronology and its *Next Destin'd Post* newsletter. Tom is also interested in ball-playing among slave and free African Americans before 1865 and in the possible contributions of German schlagball, and perhaps other mid-European games, to the evolution of base ball. He remains convinced that ball-playing was more common in North America than most sports historians allow . . . and he continues to confirm that view with fresh finds most every month.

Frank Ceresi’s new e-book [The Washington Nationals and Their Grand Tour of 1867](#) (Search <nationals ceresi ebook>) follows the National Club, and others, from 1859 through the following decade. He remains on the hunt for a photograph of the Nationals at the time of their tour, and is about to sift through the Matthew Brady collections in hopes of spotting one. Frank also serves as Executive Director of a new online baseball museum at <http://thenationalpastime.com/>, which will show up to 25,000 artifacts, including many from the origins era.

MLB Official Historian **John Thorn** has been in contact with cricket/wicket scholar Jay Patel in connection with Patel’s forthcoming book. He notes that a good fraction of his time these days goes to “facilitation” – putting the right people together for special projects. He also works with auction houses and experts on early base ball images to help identify their finds. And – all of this seems not to have lessened the number or quality of his frequent contributions to SABR’s 19CCB list-serve.

The SABR **Nineteenth Century Committee's** *Hundred Greatest Games* Project is into the backstretch, with about 25% of the chosen games preceding the Professional Era, starting with Richard Hershberger's account of an 1833 game involving the Olympics of Philadelphia and ending with Jerry Casway's report on a Pythians-Olympics game in 1869. Fourteen contributors (led by our friend, the late Craig Waff) took on writing assignments for the project.

Perhaps looking for ways to broaden upcoming travel to Ireland, **Howard Burman** cheerfully took on the job of reporting on the game of *Irish Rounders*, one our four sports sanctioned by the Gaelic Athletic Association as early as 1884. Howard's report appears in the "Glossary of Games" on the Protoball site at [http://protoball.org/Irish Rounders \(Burman's Report\)](http://protoball.org/Irish_Rounders_(Burman's_Report)). Today's players see the game as one of Irish birth, without English parentage, and having been played locally as early as the beginning of the 19th century . . . and as possibly have been exported to North America via Irish emigrants. The game has a number of variants from base ball rules, including optional running with less than two strikes, limited substitutions, no gloves for fielders, and catchers positioned well back of batters.

Brian Sheehy is planning a meeting in mid-April for VBB players to discuss themes in the evolution of base ball in the pre-professional era. For details on the Newbury MA mini-conference, contact Brian at historyball@yahoo.com.

Mark Schoenberg is a new Digger. We are looking for this street-wise New Yorker to curate Protoball's prospective *Schoenberg's Stickball Collection*.

New On the Protoball Website

[1] SABR "Spread" Data Base, Protoball "Games Tabulation" Integrated

Spurred by the SABR Committee on the Origins of Base Ball, the organization's "SABRpedia site listed well over 1500 games and clubs that together marked the spread of base ball across the nation and around the world. SABRpedia is being phased out, and its data has been migrated to the Protoball site. It is now integrated with the roughly 1600 base ball games in Craig Waff's ambitious "Games Tabulation 1.0" collection on the site. Some day, perhaps, it will be possible to find clubs, games, players, and fields in An integrated Protoball data base, which we're calling the Pre-Professional collection. The current version is at [http://protoball.org/Pre-pro Baseball](http://protoball.org/Pre-pro_Baseball).

[2] The "Roots of the Rules" of Modern Base Ball

Jeff Kittle has drafted Part One of a Two-part review of the origins of the rules of base ball when it took its recognizable modern form, including its most familiar features, including nine players, nine innings, ninety

feet, and so on. Part One examines the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845, and Part Two will examine the rules' reformulation in 1857. Block, Thorn, and others have looked at the 1845 rules, but new data are still arising, and a fresh look is in order. The draft is at http://protoball.org/1845_Knickerbocker_Rules.

One key question is how much new material was "invented" by the Knickerbockers. Not so much, it now appears. *If you'd like to review and critique the current draft of Part One, let us know.* Part Two will appear later this year.

[3] Irish Rounders Observed, Described

Howard Burman's lively overview of the game of Irish Rounders has been added to the Protoball collection of safe-haven games in its *Glossary of Games* section. See:

[http://protoball.org/Irish_Rounders_\(Burman's_Report\)](http://protoball.org/Irish_Rounders_(Burman's_Report)). The Glossary section lists over 200 distinct games, about half of them representing base ball's possible predecessor games, and the other half being derivative games like softball, whiffle ball, stickball etc. Over time, we'd like to add other in-depth accounts. *Shouldn't we help to document games like scrub and stickball before they disappear entirely? Send us material on off-shoot games you've seen played.*

[4] Help Requested – Origins-Related Blogs

Protoball wants to maintain a list of blogs with origins era content. We have made a beginning stab by listing five blogs that we know of at <http://protoball.org/Blogs>. They include blogs offered by Gary Ashwill, Jeff Kittel, Jimmy Leiderman, Tom Shieber, John Thorn, and John Zinn.

Do you know of other blogs that cover base ball's origins era? Tell us about them at Lmccray@mit.edu.

[5] Larry's Most Wanted Elusive Facts

When did modern base ball get to Chicago? Our Chronology Entry #1856.24 says: "Though baseball match games had been played in Illinois since the very early 1850's, the first Chicago Club, the Union, was not established until 1856." If this club played by Knickerbocker rules, it may mark one of the first times that the new rules held sway outside the New York area. But we have no concrete reference about the Union Club, nor assurance that it played by the new rules. *Can you help us evaluate or document this entry?*

[6] A Tip on PBall searches from Dave Anderson

Multi-word Searches: Unlike for Google and other searches, you don't need to put multi-word searches in quotation marks in the media-wiki environment that Protoball.com uses. Thus, if you want to find places where the phrases <game of base> or <Doubleday was a myth> or <benjamin franklin> appear on the site, just type those strings in the Enhanced Search field, naked.

A New Find from Tom Altherr

New England Woman Observes Ball Play in Norfolk, Virginia in 1802

Ruth Henshaw, a Massachusetts native, moved to southeast Virginia in 1801. The next spring, while traveling around the Norfolk area, twice she mentioned witnessing ball playing. In her April 25th diary entry, she wrote that on that Sunday she "saw great numbers of people of all ages, ranks and colours, sporting away the day --some playing ball, some riding the wooden horses..., others drinking, smoaking, &c." These activities offended her sabbatarian sensibilities, and she vowed she would not ride out on any more Sundays. But a couple of weeks later, traveling around Norfolk again on a Sabbath, she noted on

May 9th "the inhabitants employed as they usually are on Sundays. some taking the air in coaches, some playing at ball, at nine pins, marbles, and every kind of game, even horseracing." Despite her disdain, Henshaw left valuable evidence of the seemingly commonplace status ball play had in her day in the South. Moreover, albeit the ambiguity of the first diary entry, African Americans may have been playing ball, perhaps even with whites.

Source: [Ruth Henshaw Bascom], A New England Woman's Perspective on Norfolk, Virginia, 1801-1802: Excerpts from the Diary of Ruth Henshaw Bascom, A.G. Roeber, ed. (Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society, 1979), pp. 308-309 and 311.

Bob Tholkes' Recaps of Recent 19CBB Discussions

[19cBB] *Home Base*. Bob Tholkes posted a January, 1859 *New York Sunday Mercury* note that a base ball club official had opened a "dining saloon" called "Home Base". Donald Jensen, Peter Mancuso, and Richard Hershberger added information about the club and the site. Interestingly, there is no record that the club, the "Phanton Base Ball Club" ever played a game.

[19cBB] *Indoor practice facility, 1860*. Responding to a January post about an indoor practice facility extant in 1860, Tom Shieber posted a note from an English cricket contact that indoor facilities with nets had appeared in England by at least 1839.

[19cBB] *Rankin's early players all-America team*. Richard Hershberger posted a 1911 Rankin listing of a sort of all-amateur era all-star team, all familiar names to John Thorn and Bob Tholkes except for one pitcher, Tommy Watts.

[19cBB] *First Baseball Club in Cincinnati*. John Thorn posted an 1882 note indicating that the Live Oak of Cincinnati was the first base ball (as opposed to town ball) club there, in 1864, and asked if this is correct. Richard Hershberger had not seen any material so confirming.

[19cBB] “*Explain this play to me.*” Richard Hershberger posted an 1863 *New York Sunday Mercury* description of a play, and requested interpretation. Bob Tholkes, Eric Miklich, Paul Proia, Cliff Blau, Brad Shaw, Jack Little, Gary Goldberg-O'Maxfield, and Ed Shuman offered assistance.

[19cBB] *A base ball club of girls in Peterboro.* Richard Hershberger posted an 1868 *Philadelphia City Item* note about a girls' base ball club. Deb Shattuck provided further info about the team and her related research.

[19cBB] *Pitcher's intent.* Paul Hunkele posted two quotes indicating that "feeder" pitching had yielded to swift pitching, or at least pitching intended to make it difficult for batters to hit successfully, has not a part of New York Rules base ball from its beginning, and asked for indications to the contrary. Richard Hershberger, Paul, John Thorn, and Bob Tholkes contributed opinions and elaborations.

[19cBB] *Home Run Polka (1867).* Peter Mancuso posted an inquiry from a non-member for interpretation of the image of a ball game illustrating a sheet-music cover. Richard Hershberger sent his conclusion that the artist was unfamiliar with the game and so made several errors in its illustration.

[19cBB] *First post-game player quote?* Bob Tholkes posted a post-game quote from a player about a game which appeared in an 1865 newspaper account, noting that it was the first such he recalled seeing.

[19cBB] *Baseball on the stage.* Bob Tholkes posted an 1865 newspaper account of a planned stage comedy act in New York about baseball, possibly the earliest such thing. Deb Shattuck shared notes about female stage performers in baseball roles at slightly later dates.

[19cBB] *Christmas baseball on the prairie (1858).* Deb Shattuck posted a note about all-day ball play, including "base ball" in quotes, in Emporia, KS

[19cBB] *Batting out of turn.* A post by Richard Hershberger about a rule change of 1869 regarding batting out of turn fostered an exchange among Richard, Marcus Dickson, Jack Little, Bob Tholkes, and John Thorn about that topic and about the evolution of batting orders in the 1850s,.

Peter Morris Interview -- concluded from page 2

Protopball: One of our favorite books is your “Baseball Fever,” which details the rise of the modern game in Michigan. Based on your research experience with that project, do you think it is feasible and advisable that similar books might be written about most other states?

Peter Morris: I would certainly hope so, but such a project entails a lot of work and has few financial rewards, so I have my doubts that anyone else will undertake something that ambitious.

Protoball: Did your experience in editing the Pioneer Project books (Baseball Pioneers, McFarland) change the way you think of the base ball club of the 1850s and 1860s, and how the game spread in that era?

Peter Morris: Very much so. For example, I'd always believed that college students played a greater role than is generally recognized, but the pioneer project really underscored that for me. It may take some time for all of the new information to be digested, but I believe that this project has accomplished a lot of the basic spadework that had not yet been done when the first wave of academic books came out. My hope is that both academics and nonacademics will take the opportunity to look at the era in new ways.

Protoball: Are you actively involved in base ball research now? Do you see any future projects coming along?

Peter Morris: Very much so. I have a new book out from McFarland that tells the story of my searches for “missing” nineteenth-century major leaguers called Cracking Baseball's Cold Cases. I'm also in the midst of a major project on how baseball became the national pastime. The challenge is going to be finding an appropriate publisher.

Randall Brown's Wheaton find -- concluded from page 3.

The following paragraph left little doubt that the base ball played by the Gothams was essentially the modern game. “The first step we took...was to abolish the rule of throwing the ball at the runner....We laid out the ground at Madison square in the form of an accurate diamond, with home-plate and sand-bags for bases.” It was easy to accept the idea of ball-play in that part of the city—several founders of the Knickerbockers had participated in less formal games in a vacant lot on 27th street and the neighborhood was also home to the St. George Cricket Club. The narrator admitted that: “We had no shortstop and often played with only six or seven men on a side,” but that was also true of the early Knickerbocker club games.

Farther down the page it became clear that the “old pioneer” spoke with unusual authority. “After the Gotham club had been in existence a few months it was found necessary to reduce the rules of the new game to writing. This work fell to my hands, and the code I then formulated is substantially that in use today.” The real surprise came several sentences later when the narrator stated that: “The new game quickly became very popular with New Yorkers and the numbers of the club soon swelled beyond the fastidious notions of some of us, and we decided to withdraw and found a new organization, which we called the Knickerbocker.” Was the supposed pioneer club a spin-off?

There was one other striking remark—“The Gothams played a game of ball with the Star Cricket Club of Brooklyn and beat the Englishmen out of sight, of course. That game and the return were the only matches ever played by the first baseball club.” Was this true and, if so, did it pre-date the famous 1846 Knickerbocker/New York encounter at Elysian Fields?

The first chore was identifying the “old pioneer.” Cartwright was easily eliminated, as he was not a lawyer and had left California almost immediately after his arrival here in 1849 to settle in Hawaii. Spink's

“National Game” listed the original Knickerbocker officers—Duncan Curry, president; William R. Wheaton, vice-president, and William Tucker, secretary and treasurer. Another source cited Ebenezer Dupignac as a founder. Curry’s obituary in the *New York Times* made it clear that he was a life-long New Yorker and, although several of Dupignac’s relatives came west during the Gold Rush, Ebenezer had not. A check of California passenger lists showed that Wheaton had arrived here in 1849 and further digging revealed that Tucker had left New York for San Francisco a year later. The breakthrough came when I learned that Wheaton had served as president of the Society of California Pioneers. That organization asked its members to provide brief biographies for its files, so I contacted their archivist and, after a short wait, received a copy of Wheaton’s Gold Rush reminiscences and a photograph from his later years. Admittedly, there was no mention of baseball in this account, but the other details checked out—lawyer and politician, residence in Oakland.

Gradually, other pieces of the puzzle came to light. Peverelly’s 1866 history identified Wheaton and Tucker as the Knickerbocker members delegated to write the rules of the game. The *Examiner* article contained several specific details about the narrator’s activities as a cricket player and microfilm copies of “*The Spirit of the Times*” linked them to Wheaton. Not only had he played with the Star Cricket Club of Brooklyn, but he had, as mentioned in the interview, won a prize bat and ball in 1848. It was now clear that William R. Wheaton was the “old pioneer.”

There was one important unverified assertion, however. Did the “Gothams” play a home and home series with the Brooklyn cricketers? The answer turned up in Melvin Adelman’s *The Development of Modern Athletics: Sport in New York City, 1820-1870*, which featured newspaper accounts of a match in October, 1845. His comment rang a bell—“I was looking for other things. I never figured there'd be anything in the newspaper. In fact, this is the first newspaper reference of any kind to baseball. All of a sudden I see this and I don't believe what I'm seeing.” To be sure, I pursued his reference to *The New York Morning News* of Oct. 22, sending away to the Library of Congress for a copy. After a bit of a wait, there it was, complete with an early version of a “box score.” It turned out that Wheaton had, in fact, been present on that occasion, as he was listed as the umpire.

My research resulted in an article that appeared in *The National Pastime* in May, 2004. For the most part, I believe my arguments were sound. Wheaton implies that the Gotham club was identical with the New York club that played the Brooklyn and Elysian Field matches of 1845 and 1846, a connection supported by the presence of Murphy and Miller from the earlier roster. A minor correction involves Corporal Thompson—according to Charles Comerford, the backyard of “Madison Cottage” did host the New York club in the early 40’s, but Thompson’s connection with the roadhouse apparently came later.

There was, I must confess, one major mistake—the result of wishful thinking and a need for illustrations. I knew that the famous daguerreotype of the Knickerbocker club featured Duncan Curry, “Doc” Adams, and Cartwright. Further research showed that William Tucker was also in the picture, as well as Henry Anthony, a pioneer of photography, associated with Matthew Brady. Given that all except

Anthony were officers of the club, I thought it likely that the only unidentified figure was Wheaton. Although a comparison with the Society of Pioneers file photograph was inconclusive, I decided to go with my assumption. Since then, thanks to Monica Nucciarone, an image of Wheaton in his younger days has surfaced and, according to a prominent forensic scientist, it proves that I was wrong. I take some consolation, however, from the fact that the same question has been raised about Cartwright. My best guess is that the daguerreotype dates from 1849, when the Knickerbockers adopted a uniform, including straw hats—some months after Wheaton and Cartwright had departed for California. I suspect that my “Wheaton” is actually Walter Avery.

